

Message Text

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SUBJECT: NARCOTICS: EMBASSY VISIT TO GOM ERADICATION AREA

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1. SUMMARY: EMBASSY OFFICERS WOOD AND BERNAL TRAVELED TO CULIACAN, FEBRUARY 14-16 AT THE INVITATION OF ATTORNEY GENERAL'S EXECUTIVE OFFICER, FERNANDO BAEZA, TO OBSERVE FIELD OPERATIONS. THE QUESTION OF PARAMOUNT IMPORTANCE CENTERED ON WHY THE DECREASE IN THE COUNT OF SPRAYED POPPY FIELDS IN CY-78 AND ALSO TO DETERMINE IF THERE WAS IN FACT A REDUCTION IN THE EFFORTS PUT FORTH BY FIELD PERSONNEL IN THE HERBICIDE SPRAYING OPERATIONS. WHILE THE FIVE SECTORS COVERED REPRESENT ONLY A FRACTION OF ZONE VI, THE OFFICERS WERE FAVORABLY IMPRESSED WITH THE ACTIVITIES AT SAN JOSE BASE, WHICH INDICATED A "BUSINESS AS USUAL" ATTITUDE BY FIELD PERSONNEL. EMBASSY OFFICERS CONCLUDED, BASED ON THEIR OBSERVATIONS AND LENGTHY DISCUSSIONS WITH KEY PERSONNEL, THAT REDUCTION IN NUMBER OF FIELDS REPORTED DESTROYED IN CY-78 IS PREDICATED ON THE INTENSIVE CARRYOVER EFFECTS OF 1977

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OPERATIONS AS REFLECTED IN FEWER FIELDS, THE MILITARY PRESENCE WHICH HAS RESTRICTED ILLICIT ACTIVITIES IN THE TRADITIONAL GROWING AREAS AND TO A LESSER EXTENT, THE UNIQUE WEATHER CONDITIONS CHARACTERIZED BY A PROLONGED DROUGHT AND EXTREME COLD. END SUMMARY.

2. REFTEL TRANSMITTED A DISCUSSION OF FACTORS WHICH

MAY HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO A REDUCTION IN THE NUMBER OF POPPY FIELDS SPRAYED BY THE GOM SINCE JANUARY 1, AND UNDERTOOK TO REPORT FURTHER INFORMATION AS AVAILABLE. ON FEBRUARY 13, BAEZA EXTENDED AN INVITATION TO THE EMBASSY TO VISIT THE ERADICATION AREA IN CULIACAN, WHICH WAS ACCEPTED BY EMBASSY OFFICERS DAVID S. WOOD (DEA TRIZO COORDINATOR) AND CAESAR P. BERNAL (NARCOTICS ASSISTANCE ATTACHE).

3. EMBASSY OFFICERS FLEW TOTAL OF APPROXIMATELY 25 HOURS ON SPRAY, SUPPORT, DETECTION, AND VERIFICATION MISSIONS IN ORDER TO EVALUATE EFFECTIVENESS. FIXED AND ROTARY WING AIRCRAFT AND PROFICIENT CREWS WERE PROVIDED BY BASE CHIEF PILOT TO FLY EMBASSY OFFICERS TO A CRITICAL SECTOR FOR VERIFICATION. OFFICERS HAD AMPLE OPPORTUNITY TO MIX FREELY WITH FIELD PERSONNEL INCLUDING MILITARY GARRISON AT SAN JOSE. THEY ENTERED INTO CANDID DISCUSSIONS WITH PILOTS, OBSERVERS, MECHANICS, AND GROUND SUPPORT PERSONNEL TO OBTAIN THEIR VIEWS. EMBASSY OFFICERS OBTAINED FIRST-HAND IMPRESSION OF SEVERE DROUGHT CONDITIONS ALTHOUGH WITH THE COMING OF SPRING, MELTING SNOW AND ICE SHOULD ALLEVIATE THIS SITUATION. THEY DETECTED A HIGH MORALE WITH GOOD CAMARADERIE BETWEEN MILITARY AND CIVILIAN ELEMENTS IN SPITE OF MEDIOCRE AND INSUFFICIENT RATIONS FOR FEEDING APPROXIMATELY 25 AG PERSONNEL AT THE BASE WHERE THEY UNCLASSIFIED

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EAT AND SLEEP. THERE WAS A NOTABLE AMBIENCE OF DISCIPLINE AND SUBORDINATE STAFF WAS COMPLYING WITH VERBAL ORDERS ISSUED BY SENIOR STAFF.

4. SPRAY AND SUPPORT OPERATIONS: EMBASSY OFFICERS FLEW ALL MORNING ON FEBRUARY 15 IN A MODEL 212 HELICOPTER IN SUPPORT OF A 212 SPRAY SHIP. A U.S. REPORTER AND HIS TWO-MAN FILMING CREW FROM CHICAGO WERE ALONG TO COVER BOTH THE AIR AND GROUND OPERATIONS WHICH TOOK PLACE IN SECTORS 71 AND 81. A TOTAL OF 55 POPPY FIELDS WAS SPRAYED THAT MORNING HIGHLIGHTED BY AN OUTSTANDING DISPLAY OF COORDINATION BETWEEN THE SPRAY SHIP AND SUPPORT SHIP PILOT, WHO ON NUMEROUS OCCASIONS LITERALLY TALKED THE SPRAY PILOT TO HIS TARGET AREA. ON THIS DAY, THE POPPY FIELDS WERE LOCATED ON STEEP SLOPES, AMONG CREEK BANKS IN SOME OF THE MOST RUGGED TERRAIN EVER ENCOUNTERED BY EMBASSY OFFICERS WITH CANYON WALLS FROM 500 TO 1,000 FEET HIGH. THE GROUP LANDED IN A CANYON BOTTOM TO CONDUCT A TERRAIN RECONNAISSANCE OF A SERIES OF POPPY FIELDS AND OBSERVE THE COVERING EFFECT OF THE SPRAY RUNS. THE ACTIVITIES ALSO INCLUDED LANDING AT A WATER AND HERBICIDE RECHARGE POINT TO OBSERVE A

VERY EFFICIENT GROUND CREW. IT IS SIGNIFICANT TO NOTE THAT AT ALL POINTS THERE WERE ALWAYS WELL-ARMED, ALERT MILITARY TROOPS WHO ESTABLISHED A PERIMETER DEFENSE AT FIXED POINTS AND WHO SCREENED THE AREA FOR THE GROUP DURING THE WALKING RECONNAISSANCE.

5. RECONNAISSANCE MISSIONS FOR DETECTION: DURING THE AFTERNOON OF FEBRUARY 15, EMBASSY OFFICERS FLEW IN TWO SEPARATE RECON MISSIONS IN MODEL 206 HELICOPTERS TO SECTORS 72 AND 73 FOR A TOTAL OF FIVE HOURS TO DETECT FIELDS FOR SPRAYING. A TOTAL OF 49 POPPY FIELDS WAS DETECTED BY BOTH GROUPS. THESE WERE AT AN IMMATURE STAGE OF GROWTH BUT WERE NEVERTHELESS TARGETED FOR IMMINENT SPRAYING. BOTH GROUPS REPORTED SNOW AND ICE UNCLASSIFIED

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AT ALTITUDES AS LOW AS 7,000 FEET, RARE FOR MID-FEBRUARY.

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THEY ALSO REPORTED NUMEROUS DEAD POPPY FIELDS AS A RESULT OF SPRAYING. THE REPORTS ALSO INDICATED EXTENSIVE PREPARED GROUND FOR PLANTING OF POPPIES IN THE NEAR FUTURE.

6. TRADITIONALLY THE SENIOR, OLDER HELICOPTER PILOTS HAVE BEEN ALARMISTS IN DESCRIBING THE TURBULENT WIND CONDITIONS IN THE SIERRA IN THE AFTERNOON HOURS AND

REFUSE TO FLY DUE TO THE IMAGINED HIGH RISKS. ON THIS OCCASION, EMBASSY OFFICERS NOTED THAT YOUNGER PILOTS VOLUNTEERED FOR AFTERNOON RECON FLIGHTS WITH NO FEAR OF THE WIND CONDITIONS.

7. VERIFICATION MISSION TO EVALUATE SPRAYING EFFECTIVENESS: EMBASSY OFFICERS DEPARTED AT DAYBREAK FROM SAN JOSE FEBRUARY 16 ABOARD 206 HELICOPTER ACCCOMPANIED BY CHIEF SPOTTER JAVIER JUAREZ. THE OFFICERS SURVEYED A SMALL PORTION OF SECTOR 70, WHICH WAS REPORTED TO HAVE BEEN SPRAYED DURING THE PERIOD JANUARY 20-27. AN ANALYSIS BASED ON STATISTICS PROVIDED TO DEA BY THE AG OFFICE INDICATED A TOTAL OF 162 POPPY FIELDS DETECTED, WHILE THE SPRAY RECORDS COULD ACCOUNT FOR ONLY 61 DESTROYED. HOWEVER, DURING THE EMBASSY OFFICERS' RECONNAISSANCE IT WAS ESTIMATED THAT MORE THAN 30 GREEN, UNCLASSIFIED

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HEALTHY POPPY FIELDS WERE DETECTED; BETWEEN 80 AND 100 DEAD POPPY FIELDS WERE OBSERVED; AND 70 OR MORE PLOTS, CLEARED AND PREPARED FOR PREDICTABLE PLANTING WERE SEEN. ON SEVERAL OCCASIONS DEAD FIELDS WERE SEEN WHICH HAD A 10 TO 15 PERCENT SCATTERED COVERAGE OF GREEN VEGETABLE MATTER WHICH COULD HAVE BEEN POPPY. THE EMBASSY OFFICERS CONCLUDED THAT EITHER THE CAMPESINOS HAD STAGGERED A SECOND PLANTING OF POPPIES WITH SUFFICIENT DELAY TO ALLOW FIRST CROP TO ABSORB THE BRUNT OF THE HERBICIDE SPRAYING, THUS SHIELDING THE SECOND CROP, OR THE CAMPESINOS WERE REPLANTING IMMEDIATELY AFTER A SPRAYING OPERATION. (FYI: DURING THE EARLY STAGES OF THE SPRAYING CAMPAIGN IN 1976 WHEN THE AG AERO SERVICES PILOTS WERE BEING TRAINED, THERE WERE REPEATED CASES OF HEALTHY FIELDS DISCOVERED AFTER BEING SPRAYED. THIS WAS ATTRIBUTED TO ERRATIC OR IMPROPER AERIAL SPRAYING. HOWEVER, SINCE THAT TIME THE PILOTS HAVE GAINED INVALUABLE EXPERIENCE AND ARE NOW RATED AS SOME OF THE FINEST MOUNTAIN SPRAYING PILOTS AVAILABLE, TENDING TO NEGATE THE EARLIER INTERPRETATION.

8. EMBASSY OFFICERS BELIEVE BEST MANNER TO MINIMIZE CAMPESINOS' COUNTER-ACTION AGAINST SPRAYING IS TO INTENSIFY THE VERIFICATION FLIGHTS AND DEPEND MORE ON MODEL 206 HELICOPTERS TO SURVEY CRITICAL AREAS WHERE FIELD COUNTS ARE HIGH.

9. CONCEALMENT OF POPPY FIELDS TO AVOID AERIAL DETECTION: WHILE FLYING THE BACUBIRITO-TERREROS AREA, APPROXIMATELY THREE KILOMETERS FROM A SMALL SETTLEMENT, EMBASSY OFFICERS NOTED ALONG A DRY CREEK BED WHAT APPEARED TO BE A ROW OF TREES WITH DEAD TOP FOLIAGE. CIRCLING THE AREA WHILE

DESCENDING, THEY HAD A PANORAMIC VIEW OF A RUDIMENTARY
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YET EFFICIENT IRRIGATION SYSTEM CONSISTING OF A DEEP WELL CONCEALED UNDER A TREE. A PLATFORM BUILT OVER THE WELL SUSTAINED A 55 GALLON DRUM WHICH WAS EQUIPPED WITH A MECHANICAL DEVICE (A FIVE-GALLON CAN TIED WITH A ROPE ATTACHED TO A LEVER MADE FROM TREE LIMBS WITH A CRUDE COUNTERWEIGHT.) THIS PROVIDED THE WATER. A NETWORK OF TWO INCH PLASTIC HOSES RAN FOR HUNDREDS OF METERS FROM THE DRUM. THIS NETWORK FOLLOWED THE DOWNWARD SLOPE OF THE CREEK BED WHICH HAD BEEN TERRACED AND HAD SUCCESSIVE DAMS CONSTRUCTED FROM ROCKS AND TREE TRUNKS. HEDGEROWS WERE ARTIFICIALLY MADE BY PILING DEAD BRUSH WITH BRAMBLES ON EITHER SIDE OF THE BANKS TO KEEP LIVESTOCK FROM EATING THE POPPIES. THE TWO-INCH PLASTIC HOSE COUPLED INTO ONE-INCH HOSES WITH LONG LENGTHS WHICH WERE PERFORATED TO SERVE AS A SPRINKLER SYSTEM. THE MOST SIGNIFICANT FEATURE WAS THE EXTENSIVE CHECKERBOARD PATTERN OF TREE LIMBS AND SAPLINGS 8 TO 10 FEET HIGH SPACED THREE TO FOUR FEET APART, STUCK DEEPLY INTO THE GROUND, PROVIDING A DENSE CANOPY OF FOILAGE OVER THE PLANTS. THE POPPY FIELDS WERE WELL CULTIVATED, AND ALTHOUGH MOST OF THE PLANTS HAD LARGER THAN AVERAGE, FULLY DEVELOPED CAPSULES, NONE HAD BEEN SCORED. THE EMBASSY OFFICERS JUDGED THAT THE CAMPESINOS WERE BECOMING COMPLACENT BECAUSE THEY BELIEVED THEY HAD BEATEN THE SPRAYING EFFORTS, LEADING THE EMBASSY OFFICERS TO CONCLUDE: (1) EFFORT IS INDICATIVE OF DESPERATION EFFORTS TO ESCAPE SPRAYING; (2) EFFORT TO PREPARE IRRIGATION SYSTEM REQUIRED EXTENSIVE MANUAL LABOR FORCE, POSSIBLY ENTIRE VILLAGE; (3) IF THESE TYPES OF FIELDS ARE WIDESPREAD, MORE EXTENSIVE AND REPEATED VERIFICATION FLIGHTS, USING MODEL 206 HELICOPTERS, WILL BE REQUIRED; (4) THIS SITUATION WOULD BE IDEAL FOR A MILITARY OPERATION TO DISMANTLE THE ENTIRE SYSTEM AND SUPPRESS FURTHER GROWING ATTEMPTS IN THIS AREA.

10. WHY THE DIMINUTION OF POPPY FIELDS? THE RESPONSE
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RECEIVED TO THIS QUESTION CAME FROM THE MOST AUTHORITA-

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TIVE GOM SOURCES PRESENTLY AVAILABLE WHO ARE IN DAILY CONTACT WITH THE SITUATION. THEY HAVE, IN MOST CASES, A COMPARATIVE KNOWLEDGE FOR MAKING JUDGEMENTS. INDIVIDUALLY, ALL AGREED THAT AFTER TWO YEARS OF SPRAYING, IT WOULD BE LOGICAL AND OPTIMISTIC TO EXPECT A REDUCTION OF POPPY FIELDS IN THE TRADITIONAL GROWING AREAS. CONVERSELY, THERE REMAIN ENCLAVES OF RESISTANCE TO GOM EFFORTS BY CAMPESINOS WHO PERSIST IN THE BELIEF THAT FEDERAL FORCES WILL TIRE AND DEPART FROM THE TRADITIONAL GROWING AREAS. THE CARETAKER AT SAN JOSE BASE, WHO IS A LOCAL RESIDENT, DESCRIBES THE LOCAL POPULACE AS FALLING INTO THIS CATEGORY AS THEY STILL MAINTAIN AN ATTITUDE OF OPEN HOSTILITY TOWARD THE FEDERAL FORCES.

11. THE SECOND POSSIBLE EXPLANATION OF THE REDUCTION OF POPPY FIELDS WAS DIVIDED INTO TWO CAMPS: THOSE WHO EXPRESSED THE IDEA THAT THE REDUCTION WAS PREDICATED ON BETTER COORDINATION WITHIN THE AG RANKS, MORE EXPERIENCED AND BETTER PERSONNEL, AND BETTER EQUIPMENT; AND THOSE WHO BELIEVE THE COORDINATION WITH THE MILITARY, COUPLED WITH THEIR PERVERSIVE PRESENCE AND SUPPORT IN THE FIELD, IS A CLEAR CUT MESSAGE TO THE CAMPESINOS OF THE GOM/S UNRELENTING COMMITMENT.

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12. EMBASSY OFFICERS NOTED THAT THERE WAS NO AGREEMENT AMONG GOM FIELD SOURCES ON THE EXTENT TO WHICH

THE WEATHER CONDITIONS WERE A SIGNIFICANT FACTOR IN THE REDUCTION OF FIELDS. THERE IS TANGIBLE EVIDENCE OF THE EFFECTS OF THE PROLONGED DROUGHT THROUGHOUT THE AREA WITH SOME MINOR EXCEPTIONS NOTED CLOSE TO SOME OF THE LARGER RIVERS SUCH AS THE HUMAYA AND SINALOA. IN SUM, THE DECLINE IN NUMBER OF POPPY FIELDS IN THE NORTHWESTERN ZONE IS TAKEN AS AN OPTIMISTIC INDICATION OF THE SUCCESS OF THE PROGRAM BY THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN INVOLVED IN THIS ENDEAVOR SINCE BEFORE THE SPRAYING OPERATIONS BEGAN.

13. EMBASSY COMMENT: THE EMBASSY OFFICERS, BASED ON THEIR PERSONAL OBSERVATIONS AND ON LENGTHY CONVERSATIONS WITH NUMEROUS KEY GOM PERSONNEL IN THE FIELD, CONCLUDED THAT THE REDUCTION IN THE NUMBER OF FIELDS REPORTED THUS FAR IN 1978 RESULTS FROM: (A) THE INTENSIVE SPRAY OPERATIONS OF 1977, AS FEWER FIELDS HAVE BEEN DETECTED THIS YEAR; (B) THE EXTENSIVE MILITARY PRESENCE WHICH HAS RESTRICTED ILLICIT ACTIVITIES IN THE TRADITIONAL POPPY GROWING AREAS; AND (C) TO A LESSER EXTENT, THE UNUSUAL WEATHER CONDITIONS RESULTING FROM PROLONGED DROUGHT AND EXTREME COLD. WHEN TIME PERMITS EMBASSY OFFICERS WILL CONDUCT FURTHER EVALUATION TRIPS TO DETERMINE IF THESE CONCLUSIONS APPLY EQUALLY TO OTHER AREAS. THOMPSON

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